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ABSTRACT

A study conducted in 1989 presented a profile of Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year Award winners and nominees. The study described in this paper built on and expanded this research by developing a profile of outstanding teachers at the national level. Questionnaires were distributed to 138 Teachers of the year (1987-89). Forty-eight respondents from 35 states identified outstanding teacher characteristics, educational background and experience, important teacher tasks, and reactions to current educational issues and trends. In addition, these teachers evaluated their preparation programs. Results indicate that outstanding teachers have 16 to 20 years experience; achieve educational levels equal to or beyond the masters degree; combine coursework with classroom demands; give teacher education programs below average to good ratings; support utilization of mentors; and consider subject matter knowledge, love of children, and excellent communication skills as the most important teacher characteristics. They identify the five most important tasks for teachers as challenge and motivation of students, selection of appropriate learning activities, active listening to students, affirming and supporting students in their learning efforts, and checking for student comprehension and providing feedback. Findings imply that research on outstanding teachers can be utilized to build a foundation for excellence in teacher education and teaching. (LL)

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A FOUNDATION FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

by

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Outstanding teachers do make a difference in the lives of children. Research directed at identifying outstanding teachers tends to focus on 1) determining teacher traits or characteristics considered exemplary and important for teaching and 2) studying the direct and indirect relationship between and among teacher behaviors and variables present or operative when pupils are succeeding (Cruickshank, 1990). This type of information can be used to improve pedagogy for preservice and practicing teachers and as a basis for evaluating and changing teacher education programs and practices.

An approach to research on outstanding teachers employed by Shanoski and Hranitz (1989) was to develop a portrait of Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year Award winners and nominees. They found that these outstanding teachers were males and females at the elementary and secondary levels. Outstanding teachers in their study tended to be experienced teachers who had pursued their education. The greatest number of outstanding teachers had taught between fifteen and twenty years and had completed a master's degree. Several possesed a doctoral degree. The academic ability of outstanding teachers, as measured by self-reported undergraduate grade point average, revealed that they were good students. Most Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year Award Winners/Nominees had undergraduate grade point averages of 2.90 or higher. The three most important characteristics that today's teachers should possess were identified as love of knowledge, loves people and enthusiasm. The most important teacher task identified by these teachers was "challenges and motivates students to higher learning goals". This task reflects the role of a teacher as a Skilled Instructor. Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year winners/nominees indicated that grades, personal interviews, faculty recommendations and pre-student teaching field experiences should be utilized for admission to teacher education programs.

Purpose of the Study. The purpose of this study was to build on and expand the Shanoski and Hranitz study (1989) by developing a portrait of outstanding teachers at the national level. Teachers of the Year selected from across the country were surveyed to determine 1) important teacher characteristics, 2) the educational background and experience of outstanding teachers, 3) the most important teacher tasks, 4) how they evaluated their teacher education programs, 5) their reaction to current educational issues and trends, and 6) how they evaluated schools locally and nationally.

In the fall of 1990, a field-tested questionnaire was sent to 138 Teachers of the Year from 1987, 1988 and 1989. Forty-eight questionnaires were returned after a follow-up mailing was completed in January , 1991.

Results of the Study. Data were gathered and analyzed on the forty-eight Teachers of the Year from thirty-five states who responded to the questionnaire. Two-thirds of the respondents were female and one-third were male. Approximately 77 percent were teaching at the secondary level while 23 percent were teaching in the elementary grades. Years of teaching experience when selected ranged from eight to forty-two years in the field of education. The range of years which contained the highest number of Teachers of the Year was sixteen to twenty years.

The majority of respondents, over 83 percent, reported holding degrees beyond the bachelor's level. This figure included 54 percent who completed a master's degree and 27 percent who earned credits beyond the master's level. One of the respondents earned a doctorate degree.

An analysis of the self-reported undergraduate grade point averages revealed that 84.5 percent of respondents had G.P.A.s between 3.0 and 4.0. This figure includes almost 49 percent with G.P.A.s between 3.5-4.0 and 35.7 percent with G.P.A.s between 3.0 and 3.49. An additional 13.3 percent reported G.P.A.s between 2.5-2.99 while 2.2 percent or one individual indicated a G.P.A. between 2.0-2.49.

When asked how they would grade their teacher preparation program, elementary respondents were evenly divided in their grades of A, B and C. Secondary level males gave their teacher preparation programs more A and B grades than C and D grades. Secondary level females gave their teacher education programs few As and an equal number of B and C grades.

When asked about educational trends and issues, elementary and secondary Teachers of the Year responded positively to: mentors, cooperative learning, more federal support for education, whole language, teacher empowerment, a federal maternal leave policy and special educational programs for homeless children. Mixed to lower ratings were given to fifth-year teacher training programs, mainstreaming, the Madeline Hunter model, the Johnson City Plan, assertive discipline, national testing of teachers, a federal child care policy, schools of choice and preschools in the public schools.

Collectively, Teachers of the Year ranked subject matter knowledge, caring/love of children and excellent communication skills as the three most important characteristics of today's teachers. At the elementary level, teachers cited knowledge of teaching methods, skills and child development, caring/love of children and intelligence as the three most important characteristics that today's teachers should possess. Additional characteristics identified by elementary teachers were enthusiasm, sense of humor, love of learning and creativity. At the secondary level, teachers viewed subject matter knowledge, caring/love of children and excellent communication skills as the most important teacher characteristics. Other characteristics cited were knowledge of teaching methods, skills and child development, dedication, sense of humor, love of learning and flexibility.

The respondents ranked the ten most important tasks performed by teachers. Each task is reflective of a role of a teacher. The five roles are Organizer-Manager, Counselor, Diagnostician, Skilled Instructor and Deliverer of Content. The most frequently chosen task by elementary teachers was "selects curricula based on student needs" - a teacher as Diagnostician role. The rankings and roles of the next four tasks were: second, teacher as Counselor, task statement - "actively listens to student concerns and expressed needs"; third, teacher as Skilled Instructor, task statement - "challenges and motivates students to higher learning goals"; fourth, teacher as Diagnostician, task statement -"selects appropriate learning activities based on student needs and the learning situation" and fifth, teacher as Counselor - "affirms and supports students in thier learning efforts". In the five highest ranked tasks, elementary respondents did not choose tasks indicative of teachers as Organizer-Managers or Deliverers of Content.

The most frequently chosen teacher task by secondary teachers was "challenges and motivates students to higher learning goals" which is reflective of the role of teacher as Skilled Instructor. The rankings and roles of the next four tasks were: second, teacher as Diagnostician, task statement - "selects appropriate learning activities based on student needs and the learning situation"; third, teacher as Skilled Instructor, task statement - "checks for student comprehension; provides student feedback"; fourth, teacher as Counselor, task statement - "affirms and supports students in their learning efforts"; and fifth, teacher as Counselor, task statement - "actively listens to student concerns and expressed needs". Secondary respondents did not choose tasks indicative of the roles of Organizer-Manager or Deliverer of Content.

Collectively, approximately 70 percent of Teacher of the Year respondents viewed themselves as risk takers. They indicated their willingness to: speak out on issues related to education, challenge the status quo, try new ideas, curricula and strategies, make decisions and be an advocate for students inside and outside of school. Approximately 17 percent did not see themselves as risk takers, while nearly 13 percent saw themselves as risk takers some of the time.

At the elemenary level, approximately 64 percent of the teachers viewed themselves as risk takers compared to 71 percent at the secondary level. There did not appear to be a large difference between males and females.

When asked to grade schools locally and nationally regarding school facilities, teachers, administrators, parents and school board, respondents collectively viewed their local schools somewhat more positively than schools across the country.

Over 92 percent of elementary and secondary respondents agreed that they would encourage their children to become teachers. And lastly, almost 94 percent of Teachers of the Year indicated that they would become a teacher if they had it all to do over again.

Summary and Conclusions. An analysis of the data generated by this study indicated that outstanding teachers:

1. have sixteen to twenty years of experience.

2. have education levels equal to or beyond the master's degree. Outstanding teachers combine coursework with the demands of the classroom.

3. have undergraduate grade point averages of 3.0 or better. This finding supports the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education recommendation that a 2.5 grade point average be used as an admission and/or monitoring criteria.

4. gave their teacher preparation programs below average to good ratings. This finding merits further investigation, especially at the secondary level, where D grades and more C grades were given.

5. support the utilization of mentors, cooperative learning, more federal aid for education, whole language, teacher empowerment, a federal maternal leave policy and special educational programs for the homeless. Outstanding teachers are resources which school districts should involve in planning and implementing programs and policies.

6. are risk takers.

7. give higher grades to school facilities, teachers, administrators, parents and school boards at the local level as compared to the national level.

8. list subject matter knowledge, caring/love of children and excellent communication skills as the three most important teacher characteristics.

9. identify five teacher tasks most important for teachers to perform, namely, a) challenge and motivate students to higher learning goals; b) select appropriate learning activities based on student needs and the learning situation; c) actively listen to student concerns and expressed needs; d) affirm and support students in their learning efforts; e) check for student comprehension; provide student feedback

10. would encourage their children to become teachers.

11. would prepare for and enter the teaching profession if they had to do it all over again.

This national survey of Teachers of the Year supported the previous findings by Shanoski and Hranitz (1989). Outstanding teachers strive to address the problems of subject matter knowledge, pedagogical coursework and clinical/classroom demands by continuing their education, achieving good grades and remaining in the field of education to develop the art and science of teaching. School districts and departments of education should utilize outstanding teachers as mentors or resource persons. Studies of outstanding teachers should be utilized as a source of data to help guide educational practice and prior to making educational decisions which impact on teacher education. Research on outstanding teachers can help build a foundation for excellence in teaching.

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